

Interview with Louise Ostermeier and Henrietta Curry

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

LILLIAN ELEANOR OSTERMEIER AND HARRIET CURRY

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy

Initial interview date: February 21, 2002

Copyright 2006 ADST

Q: Eleanor, would you tell me when and where you were born and something about your family please.

OSTERMEIER: I was born in Illinois on a farm in 1913. So, you see, I'm not very young. My parents lived on the farm for their entire married life. I came and went from there all my life.

Q: Well, let's talk a little bit about your family. Your family must have been of German extraction.

OSTERMEIER: Yes. German.

Q: Where in Illinois was this farm?

OSTERMEIER: We were about 25 miles from Springfield, right in the center of Illinois.

Q: What type of crops were they raising there?

OSTERMEIER: Corn and soybean.

Library of Congress

Q: Did you speak German at all?

OSTERMEIER: No. I didn't speak German. My father didn't speak German either. His parents came over from Germany, so I know something about the family.

Q: Where did the family come from?

OSTERMEIER: From Hanover. They came over. My great-grandfather came with is seven children, one of whom was my grandfather. They came into New York Harbor, and went up the Hudson River, and crossed to Ohio. They lived in Ohio until one by one, they started coming to Illinois, and eventually all the family came to Illinois.

Q: When did the family first leave Hanover and come to the United States?

OSTERMEIER: I've got it written down someplace, but it's in the 1840s.

Q: 1840. On your mother's side, what was her background?

OSTERMEIER: I guess my mother was mostly English, but they used to say she was Scottish. It was a mixture. She was really basically Scotch, I think. Of course, many Scotts traveled and went to Ireland first, and then came to the United States. Her parents came to upper New York State and settle there. Eventually, for one reason or another, one member of the family went out to Illinois, and she went out to Illinois, and another member came out afterwards. They always kept in touch with the New York relatives. Half of them were in one place, and half in the other place.

Q: What was your mother's maiden name?

OSTERMEIER: Montgomery.

Q: Montgomery. How much education did your parents have, would you say?

Library of Congress

OSTERMEIER: They had whatever grade school education people had in those days. My mother went to business college. My father also went to a business college for accounting, and so forth, for management, but very briefly. They lived within two miles of each other in this little community. They met and married, and moved four or five miles away. My father built a house, and they lived in it the entire time they were alive.

Q: Did you grow up as a farm girl?

OSTERMEIER: Definitely, and during the depression.

Q: Oh yes.

OSTERMEIER: So, all my education was business education. We couldn't afford college.

Q: Did you have brothers or sisters?

OSTERMEIER: I have one brother who stayed on the farm his whole life, and a sister, who eventually married somebody in the military. They moved around her whole married life. She is now deceased, but her daughter lives here in Virginia suburbs.

Q: As far as school, you went to a small school?

OSTERMEIER: I went to a rural school for eight years. My first education was in a one-room country school.

Q: I was going to say, one room? How does that work?

OSTERMEIER: It was very interesting. As I look back, it was quite a small school, but I used to listen to all the other classes. I was the youngest one in school, to begin with. I listened to everybody reciting their lessons. I got a broader education than I might have otherwise. Eventually, I went to the community high school.

Library of Congress

Q: The community high school was in which city or town?

OSTERMEIER: It was in a little town called Edinburg, Illinois. It was about five miles from the farm.

Q: In high school, what sort of subjects appealed to you?

OSTERMEIER: I took what was offered, which was the absolute minimum. I liked to travel, from the very beginning, when I started to work. I used to take trips, when I could afford to feed myself. I think that helped direct me to the Foreign Service, but that was a long time afterwards.

Q: On the farm, what sort of chores were you doing?

OSTERMEIER: I didn't do much myself. My mother had chickens, and that sort of thing, and I helped with that, but I didn't ever do the real farm work. My brother was there, and he was the one to do that. Just to finish this off; our farm had been in the family. My grandfather owned the land, and eventually my father bought it from him. Now, my brother farms the land. They just recently got a plaque that says, "Centennial Farm," because the same farm has been in the same family for 100 years.

Q: Okay, Harriet, we will move to you then. When and where were you born?

CURRY: I was born I Annapolis, Maryland.

Q: Where?

CURRY: Annapolis, Maryland, not very far away. My father was a Marine officer. My mother was the daughter of the Minister at St. Anne's Church in Annapolis.

Q: Oh yes. This is on Church Circle.

Library of Congress

CURRY: That's right.

Q: An Episcopalian church.

CURRY: That's right, that's where mother met my father, two children came.

Q: When were you born?

CURRY: 1925, 77 years ago, almost.

Q: What was your father's background?

CURRY: He was from a rather poor family. I heard recently that his father had committed suicide. I knew he had died when my father was very young. He had a sister, in Germantown, Pennsylvania. There were of German and Irish background. He was going to a trade school during World War II. He was going to be a dairy farmer, but ran away from school to join the Marine Corps.

Q: We're talking about World War I.

CURRY: No, well yes, during World War I. While he was in the marine corps, an officer persuaded him to go to Annapolis, to get some training. He hadn't gone to college.

Q: So, he went to the Naval Academy?

CURRY: Yes.

Q: Do you remember what class he was in?

CURRY: Yes, 1923.

Q: Did you sort of live the life of a Navy junior, going from base to base?

Library of Congress

CURRY: It wasn't very typical. We lived at Quantico several times and at Port au Prince when my father was stationed with the Marines in Haiti, a number of times in California when my father was stationed on a ship nearby or at sea.

My father went to law school through the Navy at George Washington University in Washington, DC.

Q: Where did you go to school?

CURRY: Woodrow Wilson High School in Washington, DC.

Q: Well, where did you go before?

CURRY: I went to a number of schools in different cities, but largely in Washington. I first started school in a small town outside Los Angeles, called Point Fermin. My father was aboard a ship. That was for a year or two. We came to Washington for a couple of years; went to Quantico where I went to school for a year, out to California again, and back to Washington. So I went to a lot of Washington schools. I went to E.V. Brown, now the Chevy Chase recreational center (but I can still sing "the Brownies go marching along," that is, if I could sing.) I went to a junior high school outside of Philadelphia where my father was at the Philadelphia Navy Yard, and then we came back to Washington where I went to Woodrow Wilson High School.

Q: In school, were there any subjects that particularly interested you?

CURRY: No. Most of them I didn't mind, but one I did.

Q: Which one?

CURRY: Math.

Q: Welcome to the club.

Library of Congress

CURRY: My father said he took geometry four times at Wilson because he had four children who all had it at Wilson.

Q: Eleanor, we'll move back to you. In high school, were there any particular subjects that interested you? You said there wasn't much offered. How about reading? Anything in particular?

OSTERMEIER: I suppose I read quite a lot in my early days. The subjects studies in high school were science, algebra. It was just the classic small high school studies. I don't think I was particularly good at that. I always made good grades, and I didn't have to work very hard. I used to kind of coast along, and daydream, and suddenly realize I hadn't prepared my lesson, and I would prepare about 10 minutes before class.

Q: While you were in high school, the depression was well under way. How did the depression hit your family?

OSTERMEIER: Well, it hit the farm families pretty hard. But, in some ways, farm families were better off than everybody else, because they could eat. It used to be kind of a joke that prices were so bad, and nobody had any money, that high school kids had more money than their parents, because they just happened to have it in their pockets. We just didn't have any money. For that reason, I did not go to college. It was all my parents could do to pay the tuition for the commercial school.

Q: When you say commercial school, this is an institution that doesn't quite exist today. What was the commercial school?

OSTERMEIER: It was called business college, in those days. They offered subjects that one would take, and one would need. Being business, they offered various degrees of accounting, which I did not take. I took shorthand and typing. I was very good in both, and got out rather quickly.

Library of Congress

Q: You were somewhat isolated being on a farm. Did you have any goal in mind? You said you liked to travel, but did it translate itself into anything?

OSTERMEIER: My main goal was to get through school, and to get a job, because we needed the money so much. My first job was \$10.00 a week, and then I worked for \$15.00 a week. I worked for law offices.

Q: You worked in a law office. What were you doing in the law office?

OSTERMEIER: I was the secretary. I was the only secretary in the law office for three lawyers, because they couldn't really afford to hire anybody. It was a bad time for them. I made an impression on my bosses. They would ask me to do this, and do that. My shorthand was so good, they used to get me short-time jobs as a court reporter, because everybody was being foreclosed in those days. There were so many court cases, they needed a court reporter. I used to make a little money on the side being a court reporter, which was a pretty fast coin. There was also something in those days called The Homeowners Loan Corporation. I don't know if you have ever heard of them or not. Everybody was losing their property, and their mortgages were being called. People would get loans through the government. It was a corporation called the Homeowners Loan Corporation. One of my bosses had gotten the contract to the closing cases. He was always so busy. He was impressed with me, and almost turned the whole thing over to me.

Q: I want to take it up to the time when you moved to the government.

OSTERMEIER: My employers were embarrassed because they couldn't pay me more money, and they thought I should be doing something. They encouraged me to take the civil service for the state. I took the test, and went to work for the State of Illinois, in the Department of Public Instruction. I work there for several years.

Q: Where were you, Springfield?

Library of Congress

OSTERMEIER: Springfield, Illinois. Of course, then the war came along. I don't remember exactly how I was persuaded, but I decided to take the federal civil service. I was assigned to a government office called the War Department. In those days, it was the local office in Springfield. That is how I got into the government.

Q: Okay, well Harriet, let's move to you. While you were in high school, were you involved in any clubs or dramatics, or Glee Club, or anything like that?

CURRY: I was involved in what they called The Hi Writers Club. I did think that once I was going to write. I'm trying to think what else I was involved in, but I don't remember. I wasn't a typical student, as my sister was.

Q: You would have graduated from high school when?

CURRY: 1943.

Q: 1943, so the war was on. Where were you at that time? Here in Washington?

CURRY: I was in Washington. My father was stationed in the Navy Department. Of course, I can remember where I was when Pearl Harbor happened. I didn't know what I was going to do. I graduated from high school and went to George Washington University for two years.

Q: What were you taking there?

CURRY: Everything. It was introduction to this, and introduction to that, and introduction to Zoology which I hated (cutting up an earthworm was o fun). It was a junior college course. Then, I got bored, and I stopped. I worked at various jobs.

Q: So then what happened? Did you end up in the government?

Library of Congress

CURRY: Well, I didn't want to work for the government. My brother-in-law, later on, in the 1940s, used to tease me about being "a government girl" when I wasn't in the government. I didn't like the stigma that I thought was attached to the government.

Q: At that time, of course, particularly during the war, Washington was just loaded with young women.

CURRY: Ten women to every man, I think, something like that. But, I worked for a daily lobby and The Evening Star, which no longer exists, Brookings Institution. Some of these were summer jobs, in between college semesters, and in high school. I started out as a mimeograph clerk for the American red Cross, for \$100 a month.

Q: We might say for the record, a mimeograph clerk was equivalent to running a Xerox machine.

CURRY: It was worse than that. My mother made me an apron, because of the filthy ink that would get on my clothes. It was really worse than that, and worse than that purple stuff on the telegrams that we used to have to handle.

Q: I used to have to do some of that.

CURRY: I'm sure you did.

Q: So, how did you end up working for the State Department?

CURRY: I went on a trip to Europe by myself.

Q: This would have been when?

CURRY: In 1952 or 1953. Yes, I was working for the World Bank, for five years.

Q: What were you doing for the World Bank?

Library of Congress

CURRY: I was first a secretary and then a voucher examiner. I went to Europe for six or seven weeks, and I liked the taste of independence. I decided I would like to live all over, not out of a suitcase. I had a friend whose husband worked in the State Department, as a Foreign Service office. I went to apply at the State Department. I was 30 then, and the lady who was the personnel manager didn't think I was the type, apparently. She said, "You know, you can't come home for Christmas?" So, after a day later, I went to what was then the AID program. I think it was ICA at that time; International Cooperation Administration. I was afraid they were going to hire me before I got out the door. But, I went to Tel Aviv with them for two years, and then transferred to the State Department.

Q: Well, we will come back to that. Eleanor, how did you end up in the Washington area, in the State Department?

OSTERMEIER: Well, I was working in Springfield, as I said, for the War Department, in an office that was there. I had taken a federal civil service secretarial job exam. Then, the job I was working in was slowly being abolished at the end of the war. The Veterans Administration was going to open up everywhere. There was a report that there was to be an office in Springfield. So, another girl and I went to Chicago to apply, to work for the Veterans Administration. My intention was to return to Springfield. I had an interview with a man who was going to be the director of the whole Midwest area of the Veterans Rehabilitation Section. He said, "I'll tell you, if you will work for me for six weeks, here in Chicago, I will promise to send you to Springfield when we open the office." That was the last I ever thought about Springfield, because I was promoted, and I decided I would stay in Chicago. I worked in Chicago during the big days of the Veterans Administration. Then, the Administration more or less accomplished its purpose, and started reducing staff. I saw people all around me just desperate, because they were losing their jobs. I thought that this was not for me. I went down to an employment agency, and applied for a job as a secretary. The person who interviewed me said, "I would like to send you out to Kemper Insurance to interview with Mr. Kemper." I said, "I don't want to work in insurance." She

Library of Congress

said, "Well, this is for the chairman of the company, and I think you might be interested." So, she sent me out to be interviewed by James Kemper, who had founded Lumberman's Mutual and all the other Kemper companies. He offered me a job, and I stayed to work for him.

Q: What type of person was Mr. Kemper? How did he operate?

OSTERMEIER: He was an interesting person. He had come up from almost nothing. They used to say he would sell the policies during the day time, and wrote them at night. He really founded several big insurance companies, in the course of time. He was just work, work, work. He had some human frailties. He drank too much, for one thing. You have probably heard that. But, I worked for him. He had two or three secretaries, but I was his principal dictation secretary. I went with him when he would travel sometimes, and take notes, and stuff like that. He was a big Republican, and Eisenhower appointed him ambassador to Brazil. So, I came to Brazil with him.

Q: Okay, let's talk a bit about Brazil. You went to Brazil when, and how long were you there?

OSTERMEIER: Well, I was trying to think. It was 1954, I guess. Kemper did not stay very long at all. He was not diplomatically inclined, and was anxious to get back to his company. So, he stayed a little over a year. In the meantime, I decided I was going to stay in the Foreign Service. The man who replaced him was going to come for a short term, because he was due to retire. That was James Clements Dunn. So, I was just perfect. He had had the same secretary for years, but she decided not to come with him, because she wasn't going for a one year appointment, she was going to retire, or do something too.

Q: He had been ambassador to Italy.

OSTERMEIER: Yes, a long time in Italy. He had also been ambassador in France.

Library of Congress

Q: Yes, he was a major figure in the Foreign Service.

OSTERMEIER: Yes he was. He was very distinguished. He was one of the few career ambassadors when they first appointed career ambassadors. So, there I was when he came. It was something made to order almost, our relationship. He thought I was great and I thought he was great. He made some good recommendations. He was afraid I wasn't going to stay in the Foreign Service. He recommended that they give me whatever post I had asked for, whatever was on my wish list. He thought I should stay in the Foreign Service, and he was about to leave. London was the place I first put on my list. One day he received a letter saying, "We have decided to send your secretary to London."

Q: We'll pick that up when we come back. But, what was Ambassador Dunn's method of operation? The short time you were there, how did you see him operating there in Brazil?

OSTERMEIER: It's hard to recall now. My experience was so limited in those days. I didn't know the difference between one or the other. But, my relationship with Mr. Kemper was largely related to the previous experience. He brought his business with him. People would come and go that I knew. I was a personal secretary, but not really what you would call a Foreign Service secretary, in the real sense. I thought Mr. Dunn was really terrific from the day I laid eyes on him. He was very quiet and reserved, but definitely business. He got along very well in Brazil.

Q: Well, Harriet, we've got you into Washington. You mentioned you were being interviewed for AID, or ICA at that time. Did that appeal to you?

CURRY: I enjoyed the post, and it was one way to get overseas, which is what I wanted. My first post was Tel Aviv.

Q: Where?

CURRY: Tel Aviv, at a very interesting time.

Library of Congress

Q: You were in Tel Aviv from when to when?

CURRY: 1956 to 1958. I was wrong about the dates that I got started looking for a job in the Foreign Service. I said 1952, but from 1951 to 1956, I worked for the World Bank. I worked for the World Bank for five years. I enjoyed Tel Aviv except during the fall, when the Israelis went into Egypt.

Q: This is the Suez crisis?

CURRY: The first one, yes. The first time the Israelis went into Egypt. When I later visited friends in Cairo, they referred to it as the "Israeli incursion". The Israelis were talking about it as the "Israeli campaign". During that time, for about seven months, everybody in the AID program except a few officers and me were evacuated. I thought of transferring directly from there, in Tel Aviv, to the embassy, to see if I could work for the State Department, but it wasn't possible. But, it put the bug in my ear. After I left, after two years in Tel Aviv, again I saw that same personnel officer. A transfer was arranged, eventually, after nine months in Washington, in the Department.

Q: Well, let's talk a little about Tel Aviv. While you were there, you must have gotten involved, through acquaintances and all, in the state, with the Israelis essentially under siege, and all that?

CURRY: Yes. It was a very interesting place to be. I had some Israeli friends, but mostly embassy friends, particularly during the seven months, when the AID operation was suspended. I went to fascinating places, historically, such as Nazareth. We couldn't get to Jerusalem often, but you could go there, with permission. I picked up old coins that were on the beach surface. I learned a little bit more about the Bible being real.

Q: When you left Tel Aviv, you moved out of ICA. Where did you go? I mean, you came back for nine months in Washington.

Library of Congress

CURRY: I was in the Department of State. The arrangements were made for me to transfer to the Department of State, from ICA. I had a job in the Department for nine people, but I was sort of the low girl. I was the lowest of three girls in one office. That wasn't much fun, because even my boss thought I was smarter than that. But, it was the way things had to be worked out.

Q: Then, what happened? You came into the Foreign Service, and wither?

CURRY: Then, I went to Paris. I loved that. I hadn't thought I wanted to go to Paris. I didn't go to Paris on my trip to Europe. I was afraid of the French, for some reason!

Q: Well, we'll come back to Paris. We'll move to London. Eleanor, you were in London for sometime, weren't you?

OSTERMEIER: Yes, 13 years.

Q: Thirteen; years, by God.

OSTERMEIER: I said I was assigned to London, but I didn't mention the particular job. I was definitely assigned to be secretary to the minister, who was Walworth Barbour. I was there for five years while he was there. He was made ambassador to Israel. I fully expected to be moved, because that was as long as anybody was allowed to stay at post. Of course, I was unhappy to move, but I didn't have anything to say about it. A couple people in the embassy and the departing ambassador, Ambassador John Hay Whitney, recommended that if Bruce wasn't bringing a secretary, there was one built-in in London. He wasn't bringing a secretary, and he chose to keep me there, which was a wonderful stroke of luck for me. He stayed for eight years.

Q: So, you were in London from when to when?

Library of Congress

OSTERMEIER: 1956 to 1969. I was assigned then to the embassy in Ottawa, to be the ambassador's secretary there. I was there for a year. Ambassador Bruce was named to the Paris peace talks. I wrote to congratulate him. He wrote back and said, "Would you come to Paris?" So I went to Paris.

Q: Let's go back to, Walworth "Wally" Barbour. He became quite a fixture in Tel Aviv. He was a very well known ambassador there, but he was the Deputy Chief of Mission in London?

OSTERMEIER: Yes, DCM in London.

Q: What was he like to work for?

OSTERMEIER: We had a good friendly, personal relationship, but I thought he was reserved. He was very smart, intelligent. People consulted him about so many things. He was a real Foreign Service officer. He gave me lots of responsibility. He hadn't been happy with the previous secretary. It just grew into a very good minister-secretary relationship. I don't know what I was going to say about that, but he was great to work for.

Q: At that time, how would you describe the type of work you were doing? What were some of the issues, elements, you were dealing with?

OSTERMEIER: Well, when I first got to London, Harriet, you were talking about the Suez Canal problem.

Q: This caused quite a rift between the United States and Great Britain.

OSTERMEIER: Yes it did. I lived near the embassy. I guess because I was also secretary to the minister, I got called in two or three times in the middle of the night to assist in conferences. They were having conferences. It was very much the subject of the day, in those days. While Barbour was a real Foreign Service officer, he more or less ran the

Library of Congress

embassy. Both ambassadors were; well Whitney was, until Bruce came. Bruce didn't come until after Barbour left. He more or less ran the embassy. But, they had a very close working relationship. He was highly regarded by everybody.

Q: What were the other secretaries' backgrounds?

OSTERMEIER: Well, most of them, the junior secretaries, so to speak, were in the Foreign Service. I made lots of friends. But, I was unique in my experience. I was older than most of them. As I say, Whitney was there as ambassador. He and Mr. Barbour worked very closely together. Barbour was a professional and Whitney was a politically appointed ambassador. I became a close friend of Whitney's secretary, but the other secretaries were just Foreign Service secretaries. I keep in touch with a couple of them to this day.

Q: Well, when Bruce came, was there a change in how the embassy worked, that you saw, or how he used you?

OSTERMEIER: I suppose so. He was an old London hand, you see. He had been in London at various times.

Q: During the war?

OSTERMEIER: That's right. He had a great affiliation and feeling about London as a place to be. He was very glad to be back. He was really a professional in many ways. It used to be kind of a joke that Bruce would dictate a telegram, which a junior officer would normally dictate, but of course he was closely connected with the higher ranking British officers. They used to say the Foreign Service officers all over the country would bid to get a chance to read Bruce's telegrams. He was a great person to work for.

Q: How did you find the British you dealt with, outside the embassy, or with the staff, within the embassy? What was your impression of them?

Library of Congress

OSTERMEIER: Well, I always had very good relationships with them. I knew people. There was an organization called Embassy Secretaries in London. We had a little club; secretary to the German ambassador, the secretary to the French ambassador, and also some secretaries in the foreign office. We would have little social gatherings. I knew quite a few of those people very well. As far as the embassy people were concerned; I met Harriet at the embassy.

Q: It must have been handy, and getting to know, in social terms, the other secretaries to the other ambassadors.

OSTERMEIER: Yes, it was.

Q: You can sort of call, and smooth things over.

OSTERMEIER: Well, we did a certain amount of that, but usually it was a young officer who did that sort of thing. But, it was a personal relationship. It was interesting to see how different countries, the secretaries' duties were different than mine might have been. This was actually started before Whitney left. His secretary was also in this group. I was included, probably, because I was the minister's secretary, but it then extended after I became the ambassador's secretary. I kept in touch with some of those ladies for years.

Q: Can you think of any examples that struck you as being somewhat different? How some of them were being used?

OSTERMEIER: Well, it's hard to remember now, but they definitely did have different duties. Some of them were very much involved, almost like a junior Foreign Service officer would be, and some of them were involved more on a social level, like a social secretary might be. It's hard to make a comparison.

Q: Obviously, Bruce and his wife had a very active social life, as part of his duties. Did you get involved in this much?

Library of Congress

OSTERMEIER: Very little, because there was a social secretary to Mrs. Bruce at the embassy. I still keep in touch with her after many, many years. She stayed on and worked for Walter Annenberg. We had a good personal relationship, although our duties didn't cross very much. We had a very good personal relationship, and Harriet knew her, too.

Q: Harriet, you were in Paris from when to when?

CURRY: From 1959 to 1961. 1959 was vintage year. It really was. I went in March and the chestnuts were in blossom. Then I worked with AID/ICA people. Again, it wasn't the embassy, but it was a State Department job. I'm trying to think what they called it.

I was stationed in an office in the Hotel Talleyrand. There were four male officers and one lady economic officer. The men all smoked cigars in the office which was a big room with partitions. The three secretaries complained about their cigars, but it didn't help. They seemed to think we were being unreasonable.

Q: What sort of work were you doing?

CURRY: Nothing very interesting, but I loved being in Paris. I enjoyed it very much.

Q: Do you remember any of the officers, and who they were?

CURRY: George B. Gardner was the head of this office. The others were Ed Hermberg, Robert Brungart, Abraham Katz and I am afraid I forgot the lady's name. All were under John Tuthill.

Q: Tuthill was later ambassador to Brazil. Did you get any feel there for our relations with the French?

CURRY: No, I was too dumb. The only thing I knew was I liked being there, and I liked them. My family and friends couldn't understand why I liked the French, but I had some

Library of Congress

very nice acquaintances. I had a good landlady, which was unheard of, and a good concierge.

Q: From Paris, where did you go, in 1961?

CURRY: Then, they opened up posts in Africa. They were eager to fill them, and I went to Dakar. That is when I worked for the number two man, the ECM, who was Ross McClelland. The ambassador's secretary was leaving about a year later. At the same time, I was asking for a third year. I was asked if I would work for the ambassador, who was a political appointee, by Kennedy, Philip M. Kaiser. When Kennedy died, Johnson reappointed him. After he was there for three years, he went to London, to work as the number two person for Ambassador Bruce. That is where I met Eleanor, because he took me with him.

Q: How did you find Phil Kaiser?

CURRY: Oh, he was a character, but we got along fine. I knew how to operate with him, and his wife. I liked them both, and we became quite good friends.

Q: What was Senegal like in those days?

CURRY: It was a former French colony, so they had some good restaurants there. It was not very exciting. If I was disappointed at all, it was a bit boring to me, but lovely beaches, that we used to go to, very nearby. It was a nice, calm, lazy life. Phil Kaiser was involved when the Cuban crisis came up. He was involved in trying to persuade President Kennedy not to let the planes land at Senegal's base.

Q: You mentioned that Phil Kaiser was quite a character. In what way was he a character?

CURRY: He was pretty sure of himself, and also, I thought, slightly defensive, in being a political appointee, but I was told he had worked for the government, which he had. He had worked for the Department of Labor. A little bit of personal work for him, I didn't mind,

Library of Congress

it wasn't the kind of thing you don't see secretaries doing often but it was some personal work. He had a little bit of an ego, maybe not a little.

Q: I know he falls to one side. He has written a number of books. He was interviewed by our program. He was a Rhodes Scholar, which he would never let you forget.

CURRY: That's right. He didn't let you forget. He knew England before he was assigned to the Embassy. He has three interesting sons. Of course Robert was always with the Washington Post. David, the middle son, is a professor at the Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island, and the youngest, Charles is trying to make a living writing. All four Kaisers have published books.

Q: How about Mrs. Kaiser?

CURRY: She was a very kind-hearted person. I always liked her. She didn't have a mean bone in her body, but she was misunderstood by a lot of people, because she did like to help people. I put "help" in quotes, because she felt she was helping them.

Q: Did you get a feel for dealing with the Senegalese, at all?

CURRY: Not at all. They seemed to be nice people. They didn't bother us. I didn't feel threatened by them or anything.

Q: How about Senghor? How was he viewed? What were people saying about him?

CURRY: I thought he was highly respected, and an intellectual poet. He had a white French wife. I don't know whether people resented it or not. I rather doubt they did, because there were mixed marriages. I don't really know what the Senegalese thought. I think there were a number of attempted coups, at one time or another, while we were there, which didn't amount to anything.

Q: Well, when you asked to extend, this was somewhat unusual?

Library of Congress

CURRY: Yes, and I should explain, probably, because I came from a very busy, hectic office in Paris, and an easier, nice life. I wouldn't call it lazy. I had enough work to do, but I didn't feel Dakar was pressure. I didn't want to go home after two years, on home leave, and then go back. I just wanted to stay there an extra year.

Q: What did your family think about this, way over there?

CURRY: As far as I know, they weren't concerned about it. My family let me do what I wanted to do. I think they thought I had a level head.

Q: Now, Eleanor, in the first place, when you took off on this Foreign Service career, what did your family think about this? Did they have much feel for what you were doing?

OSTERMEIER: Well, I think they were a little shocked beyond words. I had been living in Chicago, and they were living downstate. So, we had kind of been apart, but it was a great occasion when I took a train to Washington. My young nephews and niece all went out to the train with me, as if I were going off for the rest of my life. There were tears. I think I mentioned earlier that I had worked for the state in the Illinois Department of Public Construction. I had become friendly with some of the people there. Their comment was that I was the last person in the world they would ever expect to go off in the Foreign Service. It was not in my character. I think that was the general feeling. We were in a small town, and didn't have a lot of international experience, or education. We hardly knew what an ambassador did or was. They were all just a little surprised. It was a little joke in my family that I came home at some point, and my parents were going off on what they called a "Prairie Farmer tour". That was a big thing for farm families to do. They had these quite expensive and very nice tours. That was for three or four weeks. They were escorted in.

Library of Congress

I was home, and I went down to the railroad station to see my parents off. It was kind of a joke afterwards that my father just lived to tell people that his daughter worked for the American ambassador in London. I think, by that time, he had become very proud of me.

Q: You went to Paris in 1971 or 1972?

OSTERMEIER: 1971, 1972. I left London in 1969, and went to Ottawa, from 1969 to 1971.

Q: Oh, let's talk a little about Ottawa. What were you doing in Ottawa?

OSTERMEIER: I was secretary to the Ambassador with Adolph Schmidt who was a political appointee. It was a very nice post, but quite a contrast.

Q: Did you feel that it was kind of "small town" stuff.

OSTERMEIER: I suppose I did in a way. I just adapted to the occasion. Are you familiar with the city of Ottawa?

Q: No.

OSTERMEIER: In those days, the Ottawa government was on a hill. The American embassy was across the street. They used to refer to their departments as the block, the south block, the east block, the west block, the north block. They jokingly referred to the American embassy as the south block. We had a very close relationship with the Canadians. But, now they have built a new embassy in Ottawa. I haven't seen it, but I understand it is quite nice.

Q: The government turned over the old embassy to the prime minister, something like that.

OSTERMEIER: Oh, did they? I don't know.

Q: How did Adolph Schmidt work?

Library of Congress

OSTERMEIER: He had been a friend of Ambassador Bruce. He was quite impressed to get Ambassador Bruce's secretary. He was extremely nice to me. He treated me like an officer. I sat in on meetings. I had a wonderful relationship with him. Of course, I only stayed a year. This lisle seal is my parting gift from him.

Q: Oh. Well, you went with Ambassador Bruce to the peace talks. What were the peace talks?

OSTERMEIER: They were going to try to settle the war in Vietnam. I think we had one previous whatever his title was. It was quite an international announcement when Bruce was going to go to the peace talks. I didn't participate. I didn't really know what was going on. He would go. He was more or less a figurehead, because the embassy had its speakers, the representatives. Because of his prestige, he was a very important person.

Q: Were things going to his office that you were dealing with, concerning this?

OSTERMEIER: Very little, very little. He spent a lot of time on some personal things. These were personal diaries he brought up to date, and what have you. But, he would go to the meetings. What was his name? The Foreign Service office, who is now dead, was the principal representative. They would go together. But Bruce was really the name. I'll think of the man's name.

Q: Did you feel that Bruce was feeling a little left out, or beginning to get bored with the whole diplomatic business, or not?

OSTERMEIER: I don't know. He did something for UNESCO. What does UNESCO stand for?

Q: Social organization; United Nations Social and Economic Organization, I think.

Library of Congress

OSTERMEIER: He had some dealings with that in Washington. Then, he had a great tragedy in his life. His daughter was killed.

Q: Yes, terrible.

OSTERMEIER: I think he was probably glad to get back into a more active life, but he only stayed a year. He knew he was only going to be there a year when he took the job.

Q: After a year there, what did you do then?

OSTERMEIER: Well, I was nearing, what was then, the retirement age of the Foreign Service; which used to be 60. During the days I was working for Ambassador Bruce, I had been offered a job at Dumbarton Oaks as secretary to William R. Tyler, who was going to take the job there as director. In the meantime, then, of course, lots of things changed. He did go there as director. By the time I was free to take the job, he had another Foreign Service secretary. He asked me if I would take the job. I worked for the Foreign Service Grievance Board for quite a few months. That was my final assignment before I took a month, before my retirement date came up. William R. Tyler was on the Foreign Service Grievance Board. We had talked about, when I eventually retired, that I would have this job. So, he approached me one day and said he didn't want to offer me the secretary's job, he wanted to offer me another job, which was the administrative officer, which was completely beyond my experience. It would be directly under him, so I went to work at Dumbarton Oaks as the administrative officer for a couple years. Bill Tyler retired and I didn't want to stay on.

Q: Did you have any connection with Ambassador Merrell?

OSTERMEIER: Yes, as I told you, when I first went to London, it was the old embassy. Were you ever at the old embassy in London?

Q: A long time ago.

Library of Congress

OSTERMEIER: Well, it was Number One Grosvenor Square. It was a completely different lay out. Across the hall from the minister's office was an office which was some of the protocol of the embassy. Ruth Merrell was the protocol occupant of that job. She didn't do a lot of protocol work, because that was a job that really wasn't in the budget. She did a lot of other jobs too. Because she was directly across the hall from me. Of course, her previous life was both junior ambassadors and all, she was very much a part of the ambassador's suite. We became very good friends. I met her brother, George, who of course was a retired ambassador. He came to visit Ruth. As a matter of fact, he died in London. I was in his presence quite a number of times. He had a stroke and his communication was not good. Because I had been associated with him so much, I was able to talk with him more than lots of people. He would start to say something, and he couldn't think of it, so I would say, "Oh, you mean..." So, we got along very well. The day he died, he had a Chinese servant, Tow, who had worked for him when he was ambassador in Ethiopia. Tow was with him on the street in London and he collapsed, and had a stroke and actually died. Tow piled him into a taxi and came to the embassy to get Ruth, but he was dead. (Tow was pronounced "Doe".)

Q: Well, Harriet, where did we leave you?

CURRY: Senegal. In Senegal I did work for William L. Eagleton, who was the charg# d'affaires, in Nouakchott, Mauritania, where Ambassador Kaiser was also accredited, when he came to Dakar to report to Ambassador Kaiser. When Ambassador Kaiser and I went to London after Dakar, Bill Eagleton also went there as a political officer for two years.

Q: This is the London connection where you and Eleanor met. You came with Phil Kaiser. He was deputy chief minister there.

CURRY: That's right.

Library of Congress

Q: You were in London from when to when?

CURRY: From 1964 to 1969. Eleanor and I left at about the same time.

Q: How did Phil Kaiser work in the embassy? I would have thought there would have been a problem with a possible leak because he had so many connections, particularly as a Rhodes Scholar. This can make for a difficult relationship with ambassadors.

CURRY: I think because the relationship with the ambassador was a good relationship. I'm going to tell you something that always amazed me. They had offices connected by a bathroom used by both Ambassador Bruce and Ambassador Kaiser. It was always a polite thing. They knocked on the door, but Ambassador Annenberg had that door locked so he alone used it. I thought this was an example of how things might have changed.

Q: What sort of things were you doing for Phil Kaiser?

CURRY: He did reporting of meetings. It was interesting work, the dictation.

Q: How did you find life for yourself in London?

CURRY: I loved it, I really did. I thought it was fine. I had Ruth Merrell who was sharing an office with me for a couple of years, and Eleanor.

Q: What was her title?

CURRY: She was a protocol adviser, sort of, how to seat people and all that. Not just that, but sending out invitations. I had horrible handwriting. She took over writing invitations. Ruth and Eleanor were very good to me as far as things to do, and fun to have. I had a life of my own, but I also had a good time with them.

Q: Did Phil Kaiser get around much in England?

Library of Congress

CURRY: I think he did, but not as much as I did, possible. He was invited out for weekends, and I know he went to Ireland. He had friends there. I would go off on my own quite often.

Q: What sort of things occupied you when you had some free time?

CURRY: I would go to the theater as much as I could. I took in a lot of theater. For example, I would drive to Stratford and see three plays in a weekend, an evening performance, and the next day a matinee and another evening performance. I would go alone or with Eleanor and, or other friends.

Q: Well, in 1969, when you left there, wither?

CURRY: Where did I go? I went back to Washington. It's silly, I can't remember. I wonder if it was Jamaica. Yes, it was.

Q: You were in Jamaica for how long?

CURRY: About three years.

Q: How was that, because usually you have a political ambassador, and often they are quite controversial? Who was your ambassador?

CURRY: Vincent de Roulet, appointed by President Nixon. He had come from California but lived in New York when he was appointed. His wife was the niece of Jock Whitney (small world). Both of them treated me very well, but he was controversial.

Q: Is he the one who arrived on the yacht?

CURRY: He sent it there. I don't know why people resented that. If you have a yacht, why not use it. He also had race horses.

Library of Congress

Q: Why not, right. But, I've heard other things about his relations with the rest of the embassy.

CURRY: Several things were written about him that were not very nice. He was a little bit defensive. His way of protecting himself, would be arrogant. People didn't like that, of course.

Q: Did you find yourself acting as sort of the mollifier between...?

CURRY: No, I couldn't mollify people, if they didn't like him. I got along with him, but I also got along with Phil Kaiser. They were somewhat alike though neither would understand that.

Q: Then, you went off to Ireland?

CURRY: No. Then I went to USUN, the U.S. Mission to the United Nations, in 1973 and worked for Ambassador W. Tapley Bennett, the number two man. While I was there, his ambassadors, known as the U.S. Permanent Representatives to the U.N., were John Scali, Pat Moynihan and Bill Scranton, successively. New York City was great although the job was difficult in that the secretaries would often have to wait a long time while their bosses were "across the street" at meetings at the U.N. and the secretaries wouldn't be put to work until the men came back to dictate the meetings. One time, late in the evening, Ambassador Bennett had gone home, forgetting that I was waiting to be dictated to. But there was more theater and I think I got itchy feet because I left after three years and went to Dublin in 1976. Shall I go on?

Q: Yes, why not.

CURRY: From that, working for a Republican appointee, Walter Joseph Patrick Curley, Jr. Then, Jimmy Carter came in and Ambassador Kaiser got back in. He went to Hungary, Budapest. I went with him there. Then, another year, it was Vienna. After that year in

Library of Congress

Vienna, I went back to Washington, and worked for Joan Clark as the director general's secretary, which was not very good. There was very little to do. I was unhappy finding a civil service person doing all the work I had been doing for ambassadors.

Q: But, you kept working for Kaiser, is that right?

CURRY: I worked for him for eight years; in Senegal, for three years, and London for five years. Then, after eight more years, when he was not working in the Foreign Service, he came back in, and then I worked for him for another four years.

Q: You can work for a man who is difficult for other people to work for, is that it?

CURRY: I don't know how difficult he was for other people. Ambassador Kaiser was probably difficult to work for, and other people thought that. I think probably the last four years were a mistake, in a way.

Q: Is this in Hungary?

CURRY: Yes, and after that the year in Vienna.

Q: In Vienna, this idle European experience, how did you find that, as compared to other places?

CURRY: I liked it. I liked the Hungarians. It wasn't as sophisticated as London, of course, Nothing really was. But, it was interesting to me. I was glad I went to Budapest and then Vienna, rather than the more sophisticated country last.

Q: Did you retire after Vienna?

CURRY: No.

Q: Oh, you came back to work for Joan Clark. How did you find Joan Clark?

Library of Congress

CURRY: I admired her very much.

Q: She was the Director General to the Foreign Service, at this time?

CURRY: After that, Ambassador Clark became Assistant Secretary of Consular Affairs. She frankly told me she wasn't asking me to continue working for her because I wasn't a self-starter, in that when there was nothing to do, I read the newspapers. I resented the fact that a civil servant did all the things I was used to doing for the ambassadors I had worked for, such as sorting and reading telegrams. I did work for her successor as Director General, Roy Atherton, until Bill Eagleton was assigned as Ambassador to Syria and I went there as his secretary. This was from 1985 until 1988, and my next-to-last post. It was fascinating visiting the country with the Eagletons.

Q: How did you find Syria? Syria is a difficult place, isn't it?

CURRY: The government was difficult. I didn't have to deal with the government, but as a country, it was fascinating. Ambassador Eagleton and his family took me on many trips they went on. I couldn't have done them by myself, because I didn't know any Arabic. We went to Turkey, and traveled around, looking at ruins. It was during the hostage problems. The Syrians, at that time, were not going to upset us. Well, they did upset us by not helping set the hostages free. But, we did have some very exciting times when the hostages did come out.

I gather that Syria is not as easy a place to live in as when I was there. It could be difficult. One of them smashed the front window of my car, because I had not understood I was going the wrong way on a one-way street, because there was no sign. The police asked me what I was doing. I thought he was motioning me forward, to hurry up and get out of there, but he wasn't, he was telling me to go back. So, he took his hand and broke my windshield. The feeling there was that it was too bad, but I was going down a one-way street the wrong way. But, there was no way for me to know.

Library of Congress

Q: Did you retire after Syria?

CURRY: No, I had one last year. I went to Islamabad and worked for Robert Oakley. That wasn't pleasant at all. I had a few trips that were fascinating, but I didn't like the work, and I didn't care for some of the people. Then, I retired because of age.

Q: Just to finish up, and Eleanor we'll come back to you, what have you done since you retired?

CURRY: I've done some volunteer work. I do go the bookstore at the State Department. Do you know the bookstore? Then, I do some church work and also work for the Washington Cathedral. Right now, I'm trying to get my income tax return done.

Q: Well, Eleanor, you retired from the Foreign Service when?

OSTERMEIER: After I left the Grievance Board, I came to work at Dumbarton Oaks.

Q: How long did you work for Dumbarton Oaks.

OSTERMEIER: Two years. This was while Tyler was director. This was the job that had been promised to him all his life by Mrs. Bliss. She always wanted him to be director of that, and so he took the job, but he was waiting for real retirement. But, he had offered me the job, and I went to work for him at Dumbarton Oaks. I was an administrative officer, which was very interesting, because I didn't have the background, but I certainly got along very well with him. I was appointed by Harvard University; so I retired too.

Q: What have you done since you left?

OSTERMEIER: Well, I've done a certain amount of volunteer work, but not as much as Harriet. I was a volunteer at the Cathedral for maybe ten years. What else have I done? I worked for Meals on Wheels for a few years. I worked at my family's genealogy, so I've

Library of Congress

been gong down to the archives, puttering around, getting all this background information, which has occupied my time. I traveled back and forth to Europe four or five times.

Q: Oh, boy. Well, I think we can stop at this point. It's been fun.

End of interview.